
An Innovative Program for Meeting the Literacy Needs of a Non-Majority-Culture Community

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This paper will examine literacy education in an urban Appalachian community. The authors, who include the director of a literacy center, an elementary school principal, several adult educators, a teacher educator, and members of the community, examine the ways in which literacy needs are being met from their distinct perspectives. Although each author has used a unique--and sometimes unconventional--approach to helping the urban Appalachian client groups develop literacy skills, all agree that the coming together of various agencies, institutions, and groups promotes an intergenerational approach to literacy which may prove a valuable model that can work in other cultural settings. What is unique about the concepts presented here is that all of these individuals and programs work together to form a coordinated system which benefits virtually every member of the target group. The union of these various agencies, institutions, and groups allows a spectrum of opportunities for life-long learning in the urban Appalachian community and facilitates appropriate referrals for individuals in need. In addition, each program emphasizes recognizing and respecting the traditional values of Appalachian culture and using those values in a positive way.

Background: The Perspective of an Appalachian Turned Oral Historian

Morris Garrett grew up in Oswley County, Kentucky, the poorest county in the United States. He has maintained close ties with his childhood community by making frequent trips to this area to collect oral histories and to videotape the people and places of the area. His intimate knowledge of the area provides the context for understanding the transition of the Appalachian from a rural to an urban setting.

In the mid 1900s, the coal mines of Kentucky and West Virginia were becoming automated and coal production was declining. Soon the labor market was saturated and many of the mountaineer families were faced with hardship and poverty. The families could no longer support their many children, so thousands of young people migrated to the industrial north in search of a better life. Because Cincinnati was an industrial center and was close to the area, it soon gained a substantial population of Appalachian immigrants.

These rural Appalachians transplanted to urban Cincinnati found themselves in a totally unfamiliar environment. There were no fields, mountains, or fresh air; also absent were the close blood relationships and family ties so important to mountain people.

There was tremendous trauma to our lonely young women and men, who spent hard lives at monotonous, low-wage jobs, living in crowded slum areas with few friends and little recreation. There was neither time nor money to visit their families back home, so most made do in a minimal fashion, marrying other migrants who had followed the route north and raising families as best they could in this alien and unfriendly environment.

Today, the urban Appalachian environment of Cincinnati is large, with close to 25% of the population in Greater Cincinnati having some Appalachian heritage. The circumstances of life for these people, however, has not improved. Appalachian children have the highest dropout rate in the city. Of the ten Cincinnati neighborhoods with the highest dropout rates, eight are heavily Appalachian and the other two are mixed African-American and Appalachian. Close to a third of the Appalachian population in Cincinnati are low income working class people. Unlike many other groups, these people are experiencing downward rather than upward mobility. Second generation urban Appalachians are worse off socio-economically than the first generation migrants. Even more alarming, the family stability, so characteristic of their culture, has disintegrated under the stress of urban living. In 1970, in one of our urban

Appalachian communities, 70% of the children lived in two-parent families. A decade later, in 1980, only 30% did so.

Making Reading a Reality for the Urban Appalachian: The Perspective of a Literacy Center Director

Harriette Frank has directed the Nativity Literacy Center in the predominantly urban Appalachian Cincinnati neighborhood of Price Hill for three years. The Center, which emphasizes an intergenerational approach to literacy, serves 100 or more students of all ages every year.

Reading is not considered a critical skill in the mountains. Reading in a typical mountain community involves only the Bible and the hymn book. Other books and magazines in the home are practically nonexistent. School books are scarce, out-dated, and passed down from one child to another. Local news is usually shared through the party line or a "holler from one holler to another."

In order to validate books and the importance of education in the urban Appalachian communities, an intergenerational approach is critical. Both parents and children must realize the necessity of literacy skills in an urban environment. Thus, parental involvement in the educational process is of paramount importance. The personal attention involved in becoming acquainted with the urban Appalachian family demands the time of the literacy educator, but when the learning process and the books are shared with both parents, who very often are vicarious recipients of the learning, that marvelous bond of kinship so dear to the Appalachian remains intact and report cards become emblems of great pride.

The first concern of the literacy educator, then, is integrating the Urban Appalachian adult into the education system. Braving a city school system with its educational structure and policies can be terrifying to the arriving Appalachian. The independent dignity that marks the Appalachian personality does not make asking for help easy, so these individuals are often seen as uncaring.

A second concern is working with the entire family, from small children to grandparents. The Nativity Literacy Center's intergenerational approach serves the needs of the entire family. A major part of working with the entire family, however, entails respecting their values, traditions, and language. Our solution is to integrate the many strengths possessed by the Appalachian with the tools our schools can teach and by so doing create a society we can all take pride in. An actual case of how this can happen is described below; only the names have been altered.

Mary Sims, a fifty-year-old grandmother from Western Kentucky, came to the Center three years ago to seek assistance for her grandson Jason, a fourth grader who was experiencing difficulty in school. Mary hoped that the Center's after-school and summer programs could help Jason be more successful in school.

Mary herself had absolutely no reading skills. But when she found out that the Center could help her as well as her grandson, she jumped at the chance to learn to read. Mary stayed with us a year. At the end of that time she, along with her dedicated volunteer tutor Bill, was honored at a Cincinnati Literacy Task Force dinner for the progress she had made. Although Mary and her grandson later moved to Kentucky, her success prompted her daughter Lee, a highly motivated mother of three, to begin attending the Center to earn her GED certification. She studied diligently and earned her GED after only six months. Another sister, also a mother of three, has enrolled her children in the Center's programs but is still reluctant to attend herself.

This family is a prime example of the crying need to embrace the total family when we strive to combat illiteracy.

The Perspective of an Elementary School Principal: Developing the Foundation of Lifelong Learning in an Urban Appalachian Community

Kenneth J. Sharp is the principal at Whittier Elementary School in Price Hill. He not only traces his roots to Appalachia, but has spent the majority of his professional life teaching and principaling in urban Appalachian schools. He knows firsthand the problems of these children who are caught between two cultures—a rural culture from which their parents and grandparents have just emerged and an urban culture where they live, play, and go to school.

Whittier Elementary School, a school located in a community containing a high percentage of first and second generation Appalachians, has for the past twenty years served a student population of approximately 92% white Urban Appalachian children. The special needs of these students have led to the formulation of life-long learning goals including the improvement of student self-image, self-discipline, and attendance; student academic achievement; and parental involvement in the school. These goals were articulated with the cooperation and collaboration of what we call "stakeholders," which include parents, faculty, students, and community members. Stakeholders are empowered to assume leadership roles which are necessary for program implementation; they share in decision making, value "power with others" rather than "power over others," and believe in the vision that "We will succeed!"

A number of program changes have come about through this emphasis on the needs of our student population. For example, Whittier offers an all-day every-day kindergarten program for all pupils. In grades one and two, class size for reading and communication arts has been reduced to one-half (approximately 14) to give greater personal attention to these students.

In addition to these programmatic improvements, efforts are also being made to increase family involvement, create a stronger community, and reach students on a more personal level. Parent Liaisons assist the school counselor and visiting teacher in making home visits and involving parents in school. The purposes of their efforts are to promote good student attendance, clarify school procedures, assist parents in understanding instructional programs, help parents in securing community agency services, and assist parents in becoming active participants in their child's schooling. The school counselor and visiting teacher, through individual and group counseling efforts, assist in enhancing the self-image of students. The counselor provides whole class instruction on positive life attitudes.

This recognition of the needs of our students and their families has led to great improvements in the education of the urban Appalachian children in our community.

The Perspective of an Adult Educator

Michaeline Wideman taught in a vocational education program before coming to the University of Cincinnati as a faculty member in the Reading and Study Program. She has successfully tutored and taught numerous Appalachian adults who were seeking a GED as well as first generation Appalachian college students who are breaking new ground in the field of higher education.

The common thread of Appalachia is the concept of independent dignity. These proud, determined people are driven by believing in themselves.

The most memorable Appalachian I have ever known is a man named Estel Sizemore, who asked that his name be used in this article. Estel, whose formal education ended in the second grade, is from Hyden, Kentucky. When a back injury forced Estel out of work, he decided he needed an education.

Estel entered an adult basic education program at a Cincinnati vocational school. He soon encountered difficulties, however, because his lack of formal education and his newly-discovered dyslexia severely hampered his reading ability. Instead of discouraging him, his disabili-

ties made Estel even more motivated. He became driven to talk to others about the importance of reading and writing. On his own, Estel began speaking to elementary school students of the value of education. Estel Sizemore became a self-declared "reading ambassador." He did commercials for the local television station on the importance of reading. He was also the first Project Literacy United States (PLUS) student of the month for a national promotion on the importance of reading. He became so well-known for his efforts that he received a national award from First Lady Barbara Bush, appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America," served as a state representative at a national literacy meeting, and was invited as a motivational speaker at IBM. This man from a less-than-ideal educational and economic background had become a success.

Estel Sizemore's heritage of independent dignity exemplifies Appalachians as educators should know them. People like Estel are not unique in the urban Appalachian community—but they are special.

Preservice/Inservice Programs for Teachers Working in Urban Appalachian Communities: The Role of the University

Chet Laine is a teacher educator at the University of Cincinnati. Having recently discovered his own Appalachian heritage, he has become involved with helping preservice and inservice teachers to become culturally sensitive when teaching urban Appalachian children.

The Literacy Program at the University of Cincinnati works with graduate and undergraduate students, both students preparing to be teachers of English and experienced teachers returning for graduate work in literacy. Our goals in these efforts are to help teachers develop an awareness of Appalachian culture and history with all of their students and assist teachers in meeting the needs of urban Appalachian students. We seek to develop: (a) a recognition that all students are worthy of a teacher's sympathetic attention in the classroom, (b) a desire to use the teaching of English language arts to help students become familiar with diverse peoples and culture, and (c) a respect for the individual language and dialect of each student.

In the many staff development courses that we offer, the teachers take part in presentations, activities, and discussions related to Appalachian music, art, literature, history, and culture. We wrestle with notions of family, stereotypes, cultural identity, communication, and advocacy. This type of teacher training is critical for those who will work with culturally diverse students. When English teachers make mistakes

estimating a student's or a cultural group's intellectual potential, the consequences of such errors can be enormous: mislabeling, misplacement, and inappropriate teaching. Therefore, professionals working with culturally diverse students must view those students as the best resources of information on their own needs. Students should be allowed and encouraged to initiate conversations about teaching strategies, advising needs, and cultural differences. Furthermore, teachers and program administrators must be careful to fit the curriculum to the students rather than vice versa.

Those who understand that language is power—in this case teachers—need to be trained to be explicit about the rules and codes—interactional styles, language registers, cultural taboos, attitudes toward authority—that are important for acquiring power. Being explicit helps students such as those in the urban Appalachian community learn these codes and rules more successfully.

Training teachers who have attitudes that celebrate diversity is my challenge. I must help teachers develop the sensitivity necessary to work successfully with students from varied cultures. If the sensitivity is sincere, these teachers will look for the unique gifts that each student brings to the classroom.

Making the Connections: The Perspective of a Teacher of Special-needs Students

Mary Sovik Benedetti teaches developmental writing courses for special-needs students (non-native speakers of English, students with learning disabilities, lower-income returning adult students) in an open admissions college of the University of Cincinnati. She has had extensive experience working with non-majority-culture students in various parts of the U.S. and with non-native speakers of English in Latin America.

The concept of cooperative and voluntary union among a wide spectrum of programs and services can serve as a valuable model for those who work in other cultural settings. No one organization can provide all services to all individuals of a community, but many smaller or more narrowly focused organizations can work together to provide a comprehensive system of support for newly arrived refugees, women returning to the work force, individuals with handicaps, lower-income families, or any group whose needs are not being adequately met.

I find that the benefits of working within a model such as this are enormous. When one of my urban Appalachian students at the University has a problem which our program is not equipped to handle, I know

that I can refer that student to an organization which is able to help. I have a network of individuals to whom I can turn if I need advice about working with members of the community. We learn with and from each other, and we work together to help a cultural group which has been underserved for far too long.